

Missing Christmas?
Isaiah 9 | Psalm 96 | Luke 2
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What makes Christmas so magical is that the prophets who tell us about the coming Messiah speak in abstractions. “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Those who lived in a land of deep darkness, on them light has shined.” How spooky. How interesting. Tell us more, Isaiah. We read from John each Christmas that esoteric platonic poetry. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God and the Word was with God.” Nobody seems to know exactly that that means, but it wouldn’t be Christmas Eve without the prologue to John’s gospel. Even the familiarity of the birth story takes on an enchanting quality. The bright stillness of the star. The brisk voice of the angel. The everyday anybodyness of the birth family. The simplicity of the inn. The joy of greeting a newborn child. It seems almost plausible...and yet, unreal. When we come to worship on Christmas Eve, we feel the power of these mysteries.

Christmas this year may feel especially mysterious, abstract - perhaps disappointing - because we aren’t even there for it. It’s onscreen. You’re at home. I’m in an empty sanctuary recording this in advance. Even as hard as we work to make these videos worth watching, we’re not film producers and this is just a church. In these conditions I can’t hope to replicate the dimming of the lights. The flicker of the candle. The soft whispers of Silent Night. I would never minimize the sadness of missing these things - the warmth of community, the rituals of the season, the imminence of the spirit when we are together. All these things and more are lacking this year.

You know there was a time when I could not imagine how a congregation could survive breakdowns in worship patterns like we have seen this year. I was trained to keep the church’s worship regular, consistent, and familiar - that’s the formula of success and longevity in congregations like ours. I suppose my fear has always been that folks might forget we’re here or that the memory of the power of this place and these rituals would fade. Of course I should have known better. Lots of congregations suspended worship services during the Spanish Flu of 1918 and continue to worship today. But if you’ve never lived through something like that - and I dare say no one watching our Christmas Eve service tonight has - it’s easy to underestimate the resilience and perseverance of the church.

There are many things that we tend to take for granted until we are threatened with the possibility of their loss. You truly appreciate the value of something when you consider living without it. Skipping a year of Christmas services in some churches in some neighborhoods will mean that those congregations don’t worship next year. But that is not what skipping a year of services will mean for us. We will almost certainly be back here next year. How much more will we value our time together? How much more powerfully will we sense the spirit’s presence? How much warmer will the room feel against the cold night? How much more brightly will the light of the Christ candle shine against the darkness? What if we saw it as a special privilege that we’ve gotten to celebrate Christmas in the same way for more than 100 years? So “sing to the Lord a new song,” the Psalmist encourages us. All because we have been humbled by what we might have lost. Gratitude because this experience has helped us to remember the value of these experiences for our faith and our common life. It could be that the experience of missing Christmas actually restores our gratitude and renews our faith by intensifying our sensitivity to the spiritual power of this season.

So although the circumstances of this year have dulled the mystery and the power and the enchantment of Christmas Eve, think of it this way. Isaiah is not speaking in abstractions this year. The prophets have gotten real with us. "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Those who lived in a land of deep darkness, on them light has shined." Is he speaking of ancient Hebrews - No, Isaiah is talking about us. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God and the Word was with God." The inscrutable poetry of John's prologue is more relatable this year because we have sensed that truly God has been with us from the beginning. Oh, and what about Mary and Joseph and the birth story?

When we read this text this year we can't help but notice the specificity and the immediacy. The prophets speak of reality, of real people. The decree came from Emperor Augustus. Quirinius was governor of Syria. Joseph went from Nazareth to Bethlehem. He went with Mary, whom he loved. That was the year they were expecting a baby. Angels helped them find their way. There was no room in the inn, so they delivered in a manger. Glory to God. Glory in the highest heaven.

It's a story so real that it could happen to us. Perhaps it has happened to us. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Those who lived in a land of deep darkness. On them light has shined.

Glory to God. Glory in the highest heaven.